

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Finding a 'German' Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith's *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick*

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### Abstract

This paper will introduce the young Samoan poet Courtney Sina Meredith and her debut poetry collection *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* which casts a new light on women with a Pacific or Samoan background and gives the reader a direct, and blunt, yet also a poetic insight into urban life in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Coming from the poetry slam scene and having grown up in Auckland (a city with 2 million inhabitants and a large Pacific Island community), Meredith's poetry creates an interplay of philosophical, poetic observations and depictions of modern society, and urban life and questions the role of women in today's society.

As a translator, I am particularly interested in the challenges that arise when translating not just from one language to another (in this case from English, interwoven with Samoan words and concepts, to German), but especially from one culture to another culture. According to Umberto Eco, "translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures.... A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural." Therefore, this paper will also address the importance of the translator when it comes to enabling readers in various parts of the world access to literature from a culture that is not their own. This paper aims to give an insight into contemporary Samoan poetry by introducing one of New Zealand's aspiring young poets and to discuss the questions and difficulties that arise when translating her poetry into German.

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'Translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures .... A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural.'<sup>1</sup>

This quotation by Umberto Eco serves as a starting point for this paper, as it raises fundamental questions that deal with the core of the translation process. Or, in other words: when trying to find a voice for a writer in a language other than his or her mother tongue. When translating something from one language into another, is this enrichment, does one gain something, such as a better understanding? Or is translation always a loss if we assume that the translator will never manage to capture every aspect of the original text in his or her translation? In order to explore these questions, I will focus on Courtney Sina Meredith and the themes of her writing in the first part of this article; in the second part, I will offer an insight into my translation process and

<sup>1</sup> Eco, Umberto, *Experiences in Translation*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press 2001) 17.

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provide concrete translation examples and decisions, and also address the importance of the translator in the context of postcolonial literature. I will try to make it transparent why, even though, at a first glance, it might sometimes seem as if something is ‘lost in translation’, I think that a good translation is an enrichment, not only for the reader but also for the original text. There is a kind of transformation, of dialectic happening during the translation process – some aspect of the original text might have to be neglected, and might consequently appear to be ‘lost’ in the translated text in order to gain, to create something new. This is an idea that Walter Benjamin discusses in great detail in his essay ‘The Task of the Translator’, in which he argues that literature in translation should be acknowledged as its very own genre, precisely because it will always be different to the original.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I want to focus on Courtney Sina Meredith’s first poetry collection *Brown Girls with Bright Red Lipstick* (2012),<sup>3</sup> and in particular on five poems that I have chosen for a translation and a closer analysis. Even though the thirty-six poems of this collection imply a connected whole, these five poems reveal distinct features that occur throughout the different poems of the collection and provide a deep insight into topics such as the meaning and the lived experience of identity, language and culture, and the contrast between a traditional life and a modern urban life. In order to conduct this analytical work, I will first contextualize Meredith’s poetry collection with regard to its position within the tradition of Māori and Pacific literature. The clarification of this background discussion will provide a basis for the following close reading of selected poems from *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick*.

I distinctly remember hearing Meredith’s voice for the first time. It was in Frankfurt, at the world’s largest book fair, in October 2012, when New Zealand was the guest of honour (German: Ehrengast). Meredith opened the Book Fair with a performance of a Kapa Haka group, that performed traditional Māori and Polynesian dance. Her voice was clear and strong and captured everyone in the audience. In much the same way, the voice in her poems captured me the first time that I read them. In her poems, Meredith plays with rhythm and sounds, with rhyme and double meanings – when hearing her perform her poetry, one realises that this poetry was not written purely for the page but is meant to be spoken in the presence of an audience.

Meredith’s poetry has complex political and cultural implications; by other contemporary poets from Aotearoa New Zealand, she has been adorned as ‘leader of a new generation of writers and performance artists gracing our poetry’ while her voice is described as being ‘an exciting addition to New Zealand and Pacific literature’ (Meredith 7). Meredith’s poems deal with identity and authenticity, with the meaning of language and culture, of home, of change, of relationships and the contrast between past and present. However, they do so in a very literary, distinctly poetic way.

A few remarks locating Meredith’s poetry within the tradition of Māori- and Samoan literature will illustrate that even though her poems sometimes describe an unfamiliar setting or cultural concept, they deal with timeless, universal themes that touch not only on Māori or Samoan culture, but on any culture. They are not entirely bound up with a certain time or a certain place but are transcultural. With this article, I hope to interest readers in contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1913-1926* edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 254.

<sup>3</sup> Courtney S. Meredith, *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* (Auckland, NZ: Beatnik Pub., 2012). Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

New Zealand poetry and to provide a point of view that helps them to develop a deeper understanding of Māori and Samoan writing.

Meredith's poetry collection *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* is a very promising debut in contemporary literature from Aotearoa New Zealand. Meredith was born in 1986 in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; she has Samoan parents and belongs to the Pacific Island Community of Aotearoa New Zealand. About 8% of the population of Aotearoa New Zealand have a Pacific Island background, which means that they or their ancestors had immigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand from the Pacific Islands, such as Samoa, Tonga, Fiji or the Cook Islands. About two thirds (67%) of the Pacific Island Community live in Auckland and the surrounding area. Being Samoan, Meredith belongs to the largest group within the Pacific Island Community and is recognized as one of the aspiring writers of the New Zealand literature scene. She has received accolades in the form of awards for her performances at poetry slams and for her first theatre play, *Rushing Dolls* (part of the play collection *Urbanesia*, 2011), and, in 2011, also became the 'Writer in Residence' of the LiteraturRaum Bleibtreu in Berlin as the first Pacific Island artist and the youngest artist ever to be awarded this residency. *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* (Beatnik Publishing, 2012) is her first poetry collection in print. In August 2016, Meredith published her first short story collection *A Tail of a Taniwha* and received the prestigious Iowa writer's fellowship.

*Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* is a collection of poems that cast a new light on women with a Pacific or Samoan background and gives the reader a direct, and blunt, yet poetic insight into urban life in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Coming from the poetry slam scene and having grown up in Auckland (a city with 2 million inhabitants and a large Pacific Island community), her poetry captivates with colloquial, rhythmic but sometimes also drastic language, which may create a sense of stunning distance in the reader. Her poetry creates an interplay of personal reflections, philosophical, poetic observations and depictions of modern society and urban life including the role of women in today's society and alludes to Samoan, Polynesian and Māori culture, but also Western culture.

Meredith's poems reveal the current search for identity by young women (but also by young people in general), especially those who have a Pacific-, Samoan- and Māori-background, and *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* provides an impressive insight into the situation of young people with a Pacific-, Samoan- and Māori-background in New Zealand. Meredith gives a voice to this generation and expresses their hopes, worries and dreams. Meredith herself describes her oeuvre as an on-going discussion of contemporary urban life with an underlying Pacific politique.

For the German translation of her work, I have chosen five poems, in which Meredith's rhythmic language, her fondness for ambiguities and elaborate wordplays and her artful rhymes come to expression. The underlying style of the translation is created through an aesthetic, intercultural dialogue between the original and the translation. This means that, as a translator, it is my aim to understand and to analyse how Meredith mirrors certain cultural foundations, such as for example what it means to be Samoan and to grow up in a Samoan family and community, by using literary and artistic means – and to convey it to the reader of the translation.

For example, in the poem 'Aitu' (Meredith 39), I have very consciously decided not to translate the word 'aitu' – but to leave it as it is in order to create a dialogue between the original, the translation and the reader.

Crickets sing  
aitu moves in the trees  
sacred things play dead  
taking sight in the light night  
crickets sing for me

If the reader wants to understand what the word ‘aitu’ means, and to understand the context, he or she has to make an effort to try and find out. The task of a translator is also that of a mediator: on the one hand, the translation has to give the reader an opportunity to understand words or concepts that are unfamiliar, but on the other hand, the translator also has to be careful not to reveal too much and to intervene too strongly. Additionally, the style of the author needs to be retained. In this passage, for an attentive reader unfamiliar with Samoan culture, it becomes clear from the context that ‘aitu’ is a noun, and that it is someone or something that can move or is moved; not on the earth, but in trees. The reader has probably only a vague picture in mind. However, he or she *is* able to picture something, despite the lack of an explicit explanation. I have opted against providing footnotes within the poems or the translation, as I believe that this would be at odds with the poetic structure of the poem – after all, a poem is not a scientific text, and a footnote always has an explanatory function, and adding a footnote alters the way the poem looks like on the page. Meredith’s poetry collection also provides a very brief glossary, which I have decided to translate, but in this article I have only included the words and concepts that actually appear in the poems that I have selected for translation. Thus, the poetic structure of the poem is respected, as well as the author’s decision to provide a glossary.

In my approach, I therefore follow Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who states that ‘there are two translation principles: one demands that the author from a foreign nation is brought to us in such a way that we can accept him as one of us; the other demands that we must move towards the foreign and discover its condition, its way of speaking, its characteristics.’<sup>4</sup> The first principle has a stronger focus on the target language and is also called ‘domestication’, whereas the second one, which is rather focused on the source language, is called ‘foreignization’.

There are strong dissensions among translators, scholars and critics, as some favour one principle over the other, and, depending on text and context, one might be more advisable than the other. The oldest document by a translator reflecting on this choice is a letter by Martin Luther written in 1530, when he translated the Bible from Ancient Greek and Latin into German and argued that ‘you have to ask the mother in her home, the children in the street and the common man in the market square – and listen to how they talk and then translate accordingly, so that they can understand it and realize that they are spoken to in their very own German language.’<sup>5</sup> He argued for the principle of domestication for the sake of being better understood

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<sup>4</sup> Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche* edited by Ernst Beutler. (Zürich: Artemis Verlag 1949) 705.

My translation. German original: „Es gibt zwei Übersetzungsmaximen: die eine verlangt, dass der Autor einer fremden Nation zu uns herüber gebracht werde, dergestalt, dass wir ihn als den Unsrigen ansehen können; die andere hingegen macht an uns die Forderung, dass wir uns zu dem Fremden hinüber begeben, und uns in seine Zustände, seine Sprachweise, seine Eigenheiten finden sollen.”

<sup>5</sup> Luther, Martin, *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation. Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen. Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* edited by Ernst Kähler (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam 1970) n.p.



by his target audience. Other scholars, such as Lawrence Venuti, a theorist and historian of translation, strongly argue against it and favours the 'foreignizing' approach, claiming that 'communication here is initiated and controlled by the target-language culture, it is in fact an interested interpretation, and therefore it seems less an exchange of information than an appropriation of a foreign text for domestic purposes.'<sup>6</sup>

As with other Māori and Samoan authors before her (e.g. Albert Wendt, Patricia Grace, Robert Sullivan, Selina Tusitala Marsh), Meredith uses Samoan and Māori words as stylistic means, and as a clear political message. Literature by and about Māori, Samoans and Pacific Islanders is still marginalized in New Zealand, and by using Māori and Samoan words and cultural concepts, Meredith moves herself, her culture and her people into the centre. The way Samoan words are used in her poetry can be understood with a strong cultural but also political implication, because – as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue – 'the choice of leaving words untranslated in post-colonial texts is a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing gives the translated word, and thus the receptor culture, the higher status.'<sup>7</sup> In postcolonial literature, language is not only strongly linked with identity construction, but it can also represent cultural consciousness and it is therefore a key factor in the minority's struggle for recognition and self-determination. This can be found in Meredith's writing, and in that of many writers with an indigenous background from a formerly colonized country.

I would like to examine the significance of language with regard to the construction and definition of identity in a postcolonial context, as it is central to Meredith, who has Samoan parents but grew up in an urban environment in New Zealand. Even though in Meredith's poetry this might not be as visible as in the writing of for example Patricia Grace, Hone Tuwhāre, Albert Wendt or Witi Ihimaera, who in the late 1960s and early 1970s were the first Māori and Samoan writers to be published, it is important to note that Meredith, with her Samoan ancestry, comes from a distinct tradition of Pacific storytelling and writing. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, defines the meaning of language in relation to the sense of identity by observing that 'the choice of language and the use to which language is put are central to a people's definition of itself in relation to its natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe.'<sup>8</sup> Given that language is strongly linked to identity and to ways of perceiving the world around us, the use of language in Meredith's poems can be seen as a political gesture, indicating 'difference, separation and absence from the metropolitan norm'<sup>9</sup> and thus signalling a movement which 'illustrates and initiates resistance to superimposed norms, leading to re-integration into society and a re-construction of identity.'<sup>10</sup>

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My translation. German original: „Man mus die mutter jhm hause/ die kinder auff der gassen/ den gemeinen mann auff dem marckt drumb fragen/ und den selbigen auff das maul sehen/ wie sie reden/ und darnach dolmetzchen/ so verstehen sie es den/ und mercken/ das man Deutsch mit jn redet.'

<sup>6</sup> Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge 1995) 22.

<sup>7</sup> Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London; New York: Routledge 1989) 66.

<sup>8</sup> Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa, "The Language of African Literature," *New Left Review* 150 (1985) 109.

<sup>9</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 44.

<sup>10</sup> Baumgartner-Ratheiser, Ulla, "Mapping the Colonial Other/ Mapping the Colonial Self in Patricia Grace's Fiction," *Re-Presenting Otherness: Mapping the Colonial 'Self', Mapping the Indigenous 'Other' in the Literatures of Australia and New Zealand: actes de la journée d'étude organisée à Paris X-Nanterre le 28 juin 2003* edited by Françoise Kral et al. (Nanterre: Université Paris X-Nanterre, Publidix, 2005) 85.

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In the 1970s, Samoan and Māori writers writing about their own culture were a novelty in New Zealand literature. Although Meredith does not belong to the first generation of Māori and Samoan writers, it is a political act that she places her own traditions and cultural experiences at the centre of her poetry. The earlier Māori and Samoan writers, who were published in the 1960s and 70s, had a great impact on subsequent younger Māori and Samoan writers, as scholars like Paola Della Valle emphasise.

these texts ... [marked] radical changes in the literary as well as social domain. They opposed any monocentric view on reality and showed the potential of alternative values. ... They redefined the position of Māori in relation to Pākehā<sup>11</sup> and, by doing so, forced Pākehā to do the same, underpinning the importance of literary texts as ideological discourse.<sup>12</sup>

This is underlined by Witi Ihimaera who argues that ‘the advent of Māori writers brought new perspectives on [Māori]’, because ‘in most cases, the Māori came in from the margins of Pākehā stories to the centre of their own Māori stories.’<sup>13</sup> This movement of Māori characters and Māori culture and language from the periphery to the centre of stories and novels is a crucial narrative realignment, which also occurred in Samoan and Pacific literature.

Patricia Grace herself explains this movement from periphery to centre in her stories in one of her interviews:

There are characters that haven’t been written about, there’s language that hasn’t been used in writing, customs that haven’t been exposed. We have our own interrelationships, our own view of the world, our own spirituality. We have our own ancestors, our own legacy of stories. We have our own particular culture to draw from.<sup>14</sup>

Even though almost four decades have passed between the publication of Patricia Grace’s first short story collection *Waiariki* (1975) and Meredith’s poetry collection *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* (2012), Grace’s statement still holds true for Meredith’s writing in so far as Meredith explores the voice of young people with Samoan or Pacific ancestry who challenge traditions, who explore their sexuality and who are, even today, after all poetic efforts, only insufficiently represented in literature. Meredith is the strong voice of a new generation of young people who are aware of their Samoan and Pacific roots, culture and identity – but who are, at the same time, looking for their own identity in the twenty-first century. I consider it to be important that her poetry speaks not only to an English-speaking audience, but to all those young people in this world who are dealing with similar themes and struggles. Therefore, I have decided to find a German voice for Meredith poems.

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<sup>11</sup> Pākehā is an indigenous expression to describe New Zealand people and expressions of culture that are not Māori’. See: Michael King, *Being Pākehā Now: Reflections and Recollections of a White Native* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1999), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Valle, Paola Della, *From Silence to Voice: The Rise of Māori Literature* (Auckland, NZ: Libro International 2010) 96-97.

<sup>13</sup> Ihimaera, Witi, *Where’s Waari?: A History of the Māori through the Short Story* (Auckland, NZ: Reed 2000) 11.

<sup>14</sup> Hereniko, Vilsoni, "An Interview with Patricia Grace," *Inside out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific* edited by Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield 1999) 81.

From a translator's perspective, what is most intriguing about Meredith's poems and especially her poetry collection *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* is that it is such a challenge to translate them. Take for example the following lines:

the cast moon doesn't  
muck around the meringue peaks beneath  
(line 42 - 43 in the poem 'Rushing Doll') (Meredith 51)

In this case, as well as in many others, it was already rather difficult to even create a clear picture in mind of what is being said or of the image that is created here. Consequently, it seemed almost impossible to create a German translation. In this case, it is an advantage that I am in contact with Meredith and can therefore ask her for advice or describe what I understand and confirm whether I am on the right track. In general, Roland Barthes's concept of the death of the author makes sense to only very few translators. This is not the only possible approach to translation – but I, for my part, have decided to accept authorial intention as definitive for the purpose of trying to recreate the author's work in a different language, and have found communicating with the authors I am translating to clarify certain aspects very enriching. When asking her about the lines mentioned above, her answer was the following:

I mean the moon, cast into the sky - the present moon - in all its glory still cannot change the course of the land - when I speak of meringue peaks - I mean the peaks of mountains – when they are shrouded with cloud, how it looks just like lemon meringue pie – the peaks that stiff egg whites make.' (Meredith, in an email, March 2013).

Despite the fact that I could assure I would convey the correct meaning, the translation still proved to be very difficult, as it seemed impossible to put the image into such poignant words in German. At first, I decided to translate them quite literally, trying to convey the picture that Meredith had explained in her email, but the lines became far too long and too complex, and read like this:

'Der an den Himmel verbannte Mond ist nicht in der Lage  
die Eiweiß-Gipfel unter ihm zu verändern'

Lemon Meringue Pie is a very common kind of pie in New Zealand – but it is not in Germany. Therefore, a German reader would not have been able to read the image that is created here in the same way that a reader from New Zealand could. Instead, I tried to concentrate more on the meaning rather than a literal translation, which is why one of the next versions of the translation reads as follows:

'der Schatten des Mondes verdeckt nicht mehr  
wer ich wirklich bin'

This, of course, moves far away from the original, as it does not incorporate the image of the Meringue Peaks and gives instead an interpretation. However, to me it seemed to suit the overall theme of the poem about a true identity being hidden. This version also seemed to partly adopt the meaning of the two lines as Courtney had explained them in her email. It fits very nicely into the rest of the translation and also conveys the general theme of the poem. I still somewhat regret

not being able to incorporate the Meringue peak image in my translation. However, I do believe that, as a translator, one enjoys a certain poetic freedom, especially when translating poetry, and that sometimes one has to move away from a literal translation of a line in order to better capture the meaning of it. This is the very task of every translator: to find a new voice for the piece of writing, to recreate the fabric woven together by sounds, rhythm and meaning in another language – in this case to find a German voice for Meredith's poems, which are written in English but interspersed with Samoan words. The translator's own voice, which sometimes differs significantly from the voice of the author, can at times create the sense that the mediator becomes a new or second 'author'.

In the following, I would like to have a closer look at some of Meredith's poems. I will provide a detailed account of the translation process and explain difficulties I encountered and the solutions I opted for. Translating poetry is a special challenge, because in a poem, each word, each syllable has its own and special place and meaning. A translator of poetry therefore needs to be very precise, a perfectionist, because, in the translation, every word, every syllable has to have its place as well.

In the very first poem, entitled 'Don't trust a Samoan Girl', Meredith takes up a challenging, slightly aggressive stance and confronts the reader through her colloquial language and her direct way of speaking:

Don't trust a Samoan girl  
She'll eat your heart while you sleep  
Until you are silt in the corners of pink state houses

the girls all lie they lie like me  
all of us ones like us  
in a group upright  
sometimes wearing the same thing  
we don't speak the language  
we laugh a lot

young guys in nightclubs in leather go off at us  
drunk on mother tongue  
they give you the drink in their hand  
punch cars passing the road and always  
someone's brother

crying the Manu Sina  
fucked up on K Road  
doing the Manu Samoa  
on the street on the fly

slapping themselves  
until it hurts  
until the girls  
are red.



Meredith creates an image of young, Samoan women that is far away from the traditional imagination of what young Samoan women are supposed to be like – namely, subordinate in the family hierarchy, keeping to the unwritten rules of the Samoan community, obedient and caring daughters, helping in the kitchen and finally marrying someone who is also a Pacific Islander, preferably a husband the parents chose or at least agreed to. Even in the first lines of this very first poem, the author plays with sounds, rhythm and rhymes, with double meaning and words that have many different layers, which are complicated further when we remember that this is not poetry written for the page, but a poem Meredith performs at poetry slams and readings. Take, for example, the very first line: ‘Don’t trust a Samoan girl’. Depending on which word is emphasized, the line conveys a slightly different meaning. Whereas an emphasis on the first word (‘**Don**’t trust a Samoan girl’) lets the whole line sound like a warning, an emphasis on the second word (‘Don’t **trust** a Samoan girl’) gives it a slightly different meaning, basically saying that one can do a lot with or to a Samoan girl – except for trusting her. With an emphasis on the fourth word (‘Don’t trust a **Samoan** girl’), the line suddenly gets a racist undertone, very aggressive and confrontational, whereas an emphasis on the last word (Don’t trust a Samoan **girl**) adds something sexist to the racist tone. A simple shift of emphasis in the first line can therefore alter the entire perception of and the response to the poem.

In the second line, ‘She’ll eat your heart while you sleep’, the reader is confronted with many different sounds and assonances: *eat* at the beginning of the line shares an eye-rhyme with *heart*, though both words have a very different sound. Then again *eat* rhymes (at least roughly) with the last word of the line, *sleep*. A very emphatic pronunciation of the line reveals its particular rhythm.

In this poem, the Samoan Girls mentioned in the title play the main role – they seem to be young girls, who, on the one hand, seduce men, who lie, play games, fool around, pretend to be something they are not – on the other hand, they seem to be very fragile and vulnerable. As simple as the title might be in English, for a German translator it poses many difficulties – as it is often the case with the most simple, plain phrases. The simpler and more direct sentences are, the more complex is often the task of translating them. It starts with the fact that the German word for girl (Mädchen) has a much narrower semantic scope than the English word girl – meaning, in this case, that the German word rather refers to small children and does not really capture the sense of teenage girls, playing around, trying to engage with men – or women. Another difficulty is that in many of her poems, Meredith plays with gender, sexual allusions, erotic word plays and double meanings – as in line five of this poem: ‘in a group upright’. Even though the line refers to girls, there is still a very strong allusion to an erect phallus here, a strong sexual symbol. An English-speaking reader would probably immediately have the antonym (‘bent’) in mind and the erotic and sexual meaning it entails, namely a reference to people who are gay or lesbian. All this is almost impossible to capture in a single German word. It is unclear in this passage whether the main focus lies on sexuality or on a play with gender stereotypes. In this poem, the girls seem to behave very self-assured, even cheeky, when they are together, in a group, feeling very strong and self-confident, playing with the boys and their feelings.

Terms like *Manu Sina*, *Manu Samoa* and *K Road* make it apparent that, even though this scene could theoretically take place anywhere in the world where groups of young girls and boys go to nightclubs, this specific scene is set in a context where the adolescents are familiar with the

terms Manu Sina, Manu Samoa and K Road. K Road, for example, is ‘short for “Karangahape Road”, inner Auckland alternative-culture focal point’ (Meredith 63). Manu Samoa is a ‘warrior display, performed by Manu Samoa, the Samoan national rugby team’ and Manu Sina is the ‘iconic bird of Samoa; a white seagull’ (Meredith 63). Another interesting feature of the use of language in the poem is the element of self-reflexivity. Line four begins with a self-description, ‘the girls all lie they lie like me’ (Meredith 15), meaning that they either do not seem to care what they are saying or that they are telling falsehoods on purpose. Only a few lines further, the speaker points out that actually the girls don’t speak the language – although it remains unclear whether they simply cannot speak it (and if so, which language is being referred to here? Samoan? or English? Or a distinct group or body language?) (Meredith 15). Instead, they all laugh a lot, maybe out of insecurity, or maybe they even laugh at the others, the boys. Two lines further down, we encounter the expression ‘Drunk on mother tongue’ (Meredith 15). This can be translated into German in a quite straightforward way – but again raises many questions about what the adolescents’ mother tongue is, and what is implied here. As for the translation, I have been struggling especially with maintaining the short, poignant rhythm of the poem while at the same time finding an appropriate tone for the colloquial, slang-like speech. My Translation reads as follows:

### **Trau keinem Samoanischen Girl**

sie verschlingt dein Herz wenn du schläfst  
bis du Schutt bist in den Ecken pinker Armenhütten

alle Girls lügen sie lügen wie ich  
alle die sind wie wir  
in einer stolzen Clique  
mit denselben Klamotten  
wir sprechen die Sprache nicht  
wir lachen laut

Typen in Nachtclubs ganz in Leder machen uns an  
besoffen von Muttersprache  
sie geben dir Drinks aus ihrer Hand  
rempeln gegen parkende Autos und immer  
irgendjemandes Bruder

schreien wie Manu Sina  
zugenagelt auf der K Road  
tanzen den Manu Samoa  
auf der Straße auf die Schnelle

schlagen sich  
bis es weh tut  
bis die Girls  
knallrot sind.

Some themes that were already discussed with regard to the poem 'Don't trust a Samoan Girl' reoccur in a number of Meredith's poems. This is the case, for example, in the poem 'Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick', where an image of young Samoan women is created that again contradicts expectations of what Samoan women are supposed to be like.

Brown girls in bright red lipstick  
have you seen them  
with their nice white boyfriends  
paisley scarves on scarred shoulders  
looking for their wings

Brown girls in bright red lipstick  
Where the hell are they it's Sunday  
Driving 80s commodores  
Knees dangling kitchen benches

Brown girls in bright red lipstick  
have you seen them  
with their nice white girlfriends  
reading Pablo Neruda  
on fire the crotch of suburbia

What's inside her  
Fingers Jesus penis  
The old testament  
She's promised to a Tongan welder  
Or a buff Cookie cliff diver

Brown girls in bright red lipstick  
Have you seen them at the beaches  
Drowned in virgin olive oil  
Twirling their hair into soil

Brown girls in bright red lipstick  
Rearranged up on stage  
Making your soft brothers  
Run broken home to mother

have you seen them washed in twilight  
struck by hours and the colours  
running like mascara  
taking yet another lover  
she can't sleep she's walking thunder

Brown girls in bright red lipstick  
have you seen them in the kitchen

shucking mussels cutting chicken  
egging on the lone horizon

her dark centipedes are hidden  
Manu Sina's glittered lace  
are they veins or blue pathways  
led to reddest change  
(Meredith 42)

Whereas the first stanza already partly breaks with what is traditionally accepted (the boyfriends here are white, not Samoan or brown, as the girls), the second stanza completely disrupts this tradition or expectation by introducing girlfriends. Here, what is often found in Meredith's poems becomes apparent: she plays with the readers' expectations, only to disappoint them. Another common theme is that of sexuality and eroticism mentioned here very explicitly through the use of words such as 'girlfriends', 'boyfriends', 'bright red lipstick', 'crotch', etc. At the same time, there is also sadness, a vulnerability which is part of the image created. The girls have scars that they are covering with a scarf, they are 'looking for their wings', meaning they could be looking for a way to escape from where they are, for freedom. Again, the title poses many difficulties when trying to translate it into German. In German, one might use the equivalent word for 'Black' to refer to a person from a different ethnicity (but this is politically incorrect and generally regarded as an affront) but never the word 'brown'. In Germany, brown as a colour is associated with Nazis and their politics, and if you use this word to describe someone, you are referring to his or her political background, not to ethnicity. Here, we can see very clearly the difficulty of how to translate references to certain colours, as different colours signal different things in different countries or cultures. The theme that can be very prominently found in this poem is that of young Pacific women, torn between their love life and desires and their family and family relationships.

The last three lines of this poem are intriguing, difficult to understand and to interpret.

Manu Sina's glittered lace  
are they veins or blue pathways  
led to reddest change

Robert Sullivan writes about these three lines in his introduction to Meredith's poetry collection, saying

Meredith ends her poem with an animating tatau .... It's a fine note on which to end the poem, one that promises fresh energy through the breathing lines, and change, through using the centipede form of the tatau which has its own long history. [She] embraces the tattooing traditions along lip-gloss and other western skin traditions with a completely metropolitan sensibility. (Meredith 8)

Sullivan refers to the traditional Samoan art of tattooing here. The English word tattoo is in fact believed to derive from the Polynesian word tatau.

My translation is an attempt to negotiate all of these issues:

### **Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift**

hast du sie gesehen  
mit ihren netten weißen Kerlen  
seidige Schals auf narbigen Schultern  
auf der Suche nach Flügeln

Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift  
wo zum Teufel sind sie es ist Sonntag  
fahren Gangsterkarren  
Knie baumeln Küchenbänke  
Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift  
hast du sie gesehen  
mit ihren netten weißen Freundinnen  
lesen Pablo Neruda  
fangen Feuer im Schritt der Vorstadt

Was ist in ihr  
Finger Jesus Penis  
das alte Testament  
sie ist einem Schweißer aus Tonga versprochen  
oder einem muskulösen Cook-Island Klippenspringer

Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift  
hast du sie gesehen an den Stränden  
versunken in unschuldigem Olivenöl  
drehen ihr Haar zu Strähnen

Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift  
auf der Bühne dargestellt  
lassen deine schwachen Brüder  
gebrochen heimlaufen zu ihren Müttern

Hast du sie gesehen in die Dämmerung getaucht  
von Stunden geschlagen und die Farben  
verlaufen wie Mascara  
nehmen sich noch einen Lover  
sie kann nicht schlafen sie ist wie Donner

Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift  
hast du sie gesehen in der Küche  
brechen Muscheln auf schneiden Hühnchen  
feuern sich an vor dem einsamen Horizont

ihre dunklen Tausendfüßler sind versteckt  
Manu Sinas glitzernde Schnüre



sind sie Venen oder blaue Wege  
führen zu dunkelrotem Aufbruch.

In Meredith's poetry, as for example in her poem 'Basilica' which I will examine next, allusions to places all around the world can be found – to Auckland, where she grew up, but also Jerusalem, Samoa, Apia and Munich appear. At times, Meredith even names specific streets and places. By referring to these different locations around the world and connecting them in her poem, even though they are scattered on various continents, Meredith creates a sense of her modern, well-travelled and metropolitan self. As Robert Sullivan points out: 'through her absorption of Berlin's high and low literary culture, her roots in the Auckland Samoan diaspora, and her familiarity with world Polynesian writing, she brings together an edgy singer's strength' (<https://courtneymeredith.com/>).

Meredith creates relationships and connections between seeming opposites, such as tradition and modernity, between past, present, and future, between Christian religion and the belief of her Samoan ancestors. This becomes apparent in an innovative way in the poem 'Basilica', where she writes about religious themes:

I sit in a weatherboard city  
a basilica of wondrous beauty  
roads have grown from the chest of soldiers  
arching to southern lovers  
the seabed has no memory of Calvary

In the place of a skull by lemon trees  
coloured crescents darken  
I take the bones I used to be and wash them  
in the Waikato

my grandmother sewed denim  
my second father drove a truck

From the mount of olives come promises  
they are like gold flakes in the stream

they are like electric fences of the mind  
keeping the cows brown

the land is full of boyish bones  
some Totara see higher than the Gods of Apia

Mihi be careful with your misery  
stars hang above Jerusalem  
like coloured glass

on the high plain of Peru

a woman looks like you  
Venancia with brothers in the dust  
your body is the light above the dusk

In the second half of the poem we find the line: '*Some Totara are higher than the Gods of Apia*' (Meredith 38) Apia is the capital of Samoa, so much is clear - but what is the word 'Gods' referring to? To actual Gods (and if so, are they Māori or Samoan Gods? Or the Christian God?)? Could it be referring to buildings as modern Gods, of our capitalistic, urban way of life? Or does the author want to sketch a contrast between nature (=Totara) and urban life (=Apia), and past (=where Totara were seen as Gods) and present (=where money, capitalism etc. is valued higher than the ancient Gods)? Even though this is a line that is relatively easy to translate, many questions arise throughout the poem. My translation:

### ***Basilica***

Ich sitze in einer holzverschalten Stadt  
eine Basilica von wundersamer Schönheit  
Straßen sind erwachsen aus dem Herzen von Soldaten  
strecken sich aus zu südlichen Liebhabern  
der Meeresgrund hat keine Erinnerung an Golgotha.

Unter Zitronenbäumen anstelle eines Schädels  
verdunkeln farbige Halbmonde  
Ich nehme die Knochen die ich war und wasche sie  
im Waikato

Meine Großmutter nähte Jeans  
Mein zweiter Vater fuhr nen Truck.

Vom Ölberg kommen Versprechen  
Sie sind wie Goldstaub in einem Fluss

sie sind wie elektrische Zäune des Geistes  
halten die Kühe braun

das Land ist voll Knabenknochen  
einige Totara sehen mehr als die Götter von Apia.

Mihi sei vorsichtig mit deinem Kummer  
Sterne hängen über Jerusalem  
wie kunstvolles Glas

Auf der Hochebene von Peru  
sieht eine Frau aus wie du  
Venancia mit Brüdern im Staubgestöber  
dein Körper ist das Licht im Sternengeflimmer.

In the poem 'Rushing Doll', the translation situation is, again, a very different one. In this poem, Meredith artfully plays with sounds, rhythm and rhyme, which becomes particularly apparent when she recites it:

I dismiss my ethics because your skin is magic  
I've been around the block and the boys are getting  
thick  
brick is getting older, tyres getting flat,  
babies from the shacks are desert black soldiers

Seeds are dying trees hiding scars on the faces, of  
Pitts without leashes and lippy hippy misses  
supermarket prices are higher than the vices of  
artistic license –  
I stay in the state of misplaced Angel, asphalt  
criminal, high on the subliminal  
and every time I pray, it's for a piece of ass tryna get  
away

I've wrestled with the salt rocking west coast waves  
the wives by my bedside had husbands in the grave –  
everything we cussed and brought up made me  
change  
in the end you drink milky tea and watch a lot of TV

My verses have stalkers my poems have daughters  
I'm looking for a daddy for my unborn story

He must know the difference between him and infinity  
be my new chemistry set like DJ decks

I want – less furrowed brows more pregnant cows  
in third world villages, success men like prisoners  
models lying naked in my sleepy nest  
drinking carrot juice to see through the  
blackness

I want to be an activist but my country is sleeping  
I thought I'd be an actress but my ethnicity's hungry  
me versus the monkeys on how to beat the junkies  
I'm not a luck advocate but I'm sick of fate  
or – faith in the new world with its old name.

I'm a girl in a girl in a girl in a girl

I'm a Rushing Doll.  
And the dole is a resource like mud is to moles  
mafia queens, even, need tunnels to run in  
and eyes at me on streets because the weakest looks  
away first –  
must make the fearless, closest to tears  
even in love, we are in despair.

I'm in season, in harvest  
the cast moon doesn't  
muck around the meringue peaks beneath

a bit of rock in the monsoon  
a bit of star on your teeth  
I'm a Rushing Doll.

This poem is so rich that many pages could be written about it but in this essay, I would like to have a closer look at only one aspect, namely the term 'Rushing Doll'. Even after taking a closer look at the term, one might still wonder what it stands for. Reading through the poem, and encountering the lines

I'm a girl in a girl in a girl in a girl  
I'm a Rushing Doll. (Meredith 51)

the image of a Russian Doll comes to mind – a wooden doll, in which, when opened, one finds a slightly smaller one, and again and again, until there are many dolls in front of you. 'Rushing' and 'Russian' is doubtlessly a wordplay here, as both words sound so similar. 'There are many different layers to a 'Rushing Doll' that might not be visible at first glance. It carries within itself many secrets that are only revealed when we approach it carefully. At the same time, the term 'Rushing' is onomatopoeic. When uttering the word aloud, it produces a rather short sound on the first syllable ('Ru') which is followed by swishing sound ('shhhhh') that seems to linger ('ing---'). Almost like a gush of wind, blowing by, or something that moves very fast and is already gone while the sound is still audible. It just rushes by.

Considering these observations, what is a rushing doll? A doll or a person with many different layers to it? Being in a hurry, rushing by? Meredith's eponymous play seeks to represent a new generation of Pacific and Māori women actively engaged with their dreams. Is this what the term 'Rushing Doll' refers to? Self-confident, strong and emancipated young women with a Pacific or Māori background, who break out of their families' traditions, who have dreams that they intend to pursue. And if it does, if the term is such an important, significant one in this context – how could it be translated? The German words for 'Russian' and 'Rushing' are unfortunately not at all similar in their sound. To further complicate matters, in Germany, we call the Russian Dolls by their Russian name – Matryoshka. This would give the poem a rather different cultural layer. The semantic scope of the word *doll* is also somewhat different in German. If used to refer to a young woman, it would have a rather sexist tone to it which I doubt would reflect Meredith's use of the word. In the end, I have decided not to

translate the term ‘Rushing Doll’ – I think it’s a beautiful term, and, despite many attempts, I was not able to find a fitting translation that incorporated the sound of the word ‘rushing’, as well as the word play with ‘Russian’ and the meaning it implies. However, reading the rest of the poem, I believe a German reader will be able to imagine what it might mean. This is what translation is about: to try and find a way of recreating sounds, rhythm, rhymes, images and meaning all at the same time. This is the task – and the challenge. My translation tackles it as follows:

### **Rushing Doll**

Ich scheiß auf die Moral, deine Haut zieht mich an  
Ich bin schon ne Weile da und die Kerle werden  
krass  
Mauern werden älter, Reifen werden platt  
Babies aus den Hütten Soldaten wüstenschwarz

Samen vertrocknen Bäume verhüllen ihre Narben auf den Gesichtern,  
von  
Pittbulls ohne Leine und frechen hippen Frauchen  
Supermarkt-Preise sind höher als die Laster  
Pseudo-künstlerischer Ausraster  
Ich bleib wie ich bin verlorener Engel Asphalt  
Kriminelle an der Bewusstseinsschwelle  
und mit jedem Gebet will ich dass ein Arsch endlich  
geht

Ich rang mit salzschwellenden Westküstenwellen  
die Frauen an meinem Bett hatten Männer an Todesschwellen –  
alles, was wir verfluchten und mit uns nahmen veränderte  
mich  
am Ende trinkst du milchigen Tee beim Fernsehlicht

Meine Verse haben Stalker meine Gedichte Töchter  
ich such nach nem Daddy für meine ungeborene Geschichte

Er muss sie kennen die Entfernung zwischen ihm und der Ewigkeit  
muss mein neues Chemie-Set sein und DJ Deck

Ich will – weniger Mühe, mehr trachtige Kühe  
in der 3. Welt, Erfolg, Männer wie Gefangene  
Models nackt in meinem schläfrigen Nest  
trinken Möhrensaft um die Wahrheit zu finden in der  
Finsternis

Ich würd gern kämpfen doch mein Land pennt zu sehr



Ich dacht ich würd schauspielern, aber meine Herkunft will mehr  
ich gegen die Monkeys wer schlägt die Junkies  
Ich glaub nicht mehr an Zufall aber das Schicksal hab ich satt, zu lahm  
Glauben in der neuen Welt mit ihrem alten Namen.

Ich bin ein Girl in einem Girl in einem Girl in einem Girl  
Ich bin ne Rushing Doll.

Auf Stütze kann man bauen wie Maulwürfe auf Schlamm  
Sogar Mafia-Queens brauchen Tunnel zum Rumschleichen  
und Augen auf mich auf der Straße denn der Schwächste schaut  
zuerst weg –  
sei furchtlos am Rand der Tränen  
selbst in der Liebe sind wir der Verzweiflung nah.

Ich steh in Blüte, kurz vor der Ernte,  
der Schatten des Monds verdeckt nicht mehr  
wer ich eigentlich bin

ein Stück Fels im Regen  
ein Stück Stern auf deinen Zähnen  
Ich bin eine Rushing Doll.

Coming back to the question that was raised at the very beginning of the essay, I have come to the conclusion that something might well be ‘lost in translation’ as it is not always possible for the translator to capture and recreate every nuance of the original text. However, the translation will, invariably, add a new dimension to the original text and highlight aspects that were invisible or concealed before. It will also ensure that the text can now be read by readers who speak different languages, and is available to a larger audience – or, as Walter Benjamin underlines, the translation of a work of literature ‘marks [its] stage of continued life.’<sup>15</sup>

Considering the importance of the translator in a postcolonial context, I argue that the translator can be seen as a central mediator figure, someone who crosses borders – the borders of languages, of cultures. We make it possible for readers to discover and explore a foreign culture despite a perceived or in fact existing language barrier. In my case, I have translated poetry by Māori and Samoan authors from English into German – and thus made them, their work, their thoughts and ideas accessible for a German reading audience who have an interest in Māori and indigenous poetry. However, my choices and my understanding of being a translator in a postcolonial context also bring a political implication with them. Much in the same way that Meredith or Robert Sullivan<sup>16</sup> make the choice of leaving words from their indigenous language untranslated and make this a political act, I, too, seek to honour and to re-create this in my

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin 254.

<sup>16</sup> A poet whose poetry collection *Star Waka* I translated in 2012 and which was the first poetry collection by a Māori author to be translated in its entirety into German.

translation. Translating marginalised poetry in a postcolonial context, finding – and not giving – a voice for marginalised people, is a political act.

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*Lotta Schneidemesser's doctoral research focuses on the moment of homecoming and looking into the broader issues that concern home, homecoming and return migration in Māori and Pacific Literature. She was awarded a scholarship by the Heinrich-Böll foundation for the duration of her PhD. In 2012, she translated the poetry collection Star Waka by Māori poet Robert Sullivan into German, which was the first poetry collection by a Māori author that has ever been translated into German.*

### Glossary

Aitu: ghost, spirit, demon (Samoan)

Apia: capital of Western Samoa

KRoad: short for 'Karangahape Road,' inner Auckland alternative-cultural focal point

Manu Samoa: warrior display, performed by Manu Samoa, the Samoan national rugby team

Manu Sina: iconic bird of Samoa; white seagull

Mihi: A Māori greeting or formal welcome (as in 'mihi w-hahatan'). Also a woman's name

Totara: a tall species of native New Zealand tree

Waikato: the North Island's largest river, south of Auckland

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